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New rules create sharing between federal and non-federal radio systems

By Thomas Kidd - [July-September 2009](#)

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) Interdepartment Radio Advisory Committee (IRAC) recently approved an addition to the Manual of Regulations and Procedures for Federal Radio Frequency Management. The new paragraph, 8.2.47, enables federal and non-federal agencies to share radio systems. Navy and Marine Corps first responders may have an opportunity to dramatically expand their geographic coverage without the prohibitive cost of building additional infrastructure. This change in governance charts a new course away from federal and non-federal agencies jealously guarding their allotted spectrum. Before this change, sharing among federal and non-federal radio systems was extremely difficult and as a result, rare.

The electromagnetic spectrum, which these radio systems utilize, is a sovereign resource of every nation to manage as they see fit. The United States manages spectrum usage under two sets of rules, one for federal government agencies, such as the departments of the Navy, Justice and Homeland Security, and one for non-federal agencies, including state, local and tribal police; fire and ambulance services; business radio; broadcast television and radio; and more.

United States Code further separates portions of the radio spectrum into frequency bands for exclusive use among federal users, and other bands for exclusive use among non-federal users. Even though there may be no operational restriction to sharing frequency resources, these regulatory limitations made it difficult, if not impossible, to share radio systems between federal and non-federal users.

The Department of the Navy Chief Information Officer (DON CIO) will lead a push to expand Navy and Marine Corps systems to take full advantage of this new opportunity. All Land Mobile Radio System (LMRS) operators are encouraged to evaluate their current service area and determine if their system coverage and capabilities may be expanded under the new rules. Many systems may be able to expand their service area with minimal or no new equipment. Navy and Marine Corps land mobile radios may already be capable of taking advantage of non-federal frequency bands.

Sharing among federal and non-federal radio systems involves a three-step process. First, the federal and non-federal users must agree to share. This agreement is then coordinated with the IRAC to ensure it adequately addresses the needs of the government, including the return of federal frequencies if all federal users withdraw from the system or if the federal frequencies are no longer available for non-federal use.

Second, the federal user must submit technical information about the non-federal system to the IRAC to certify that it is in compliance with other rules governing federal radio systems. And lastly, the federal user requests the federal equivalent to a radio frequency license in the non-federal frequency band.

The exact process and procedures, in paragraph 8.2.47 of the NTIA Manual, are reprinted in the text box below. However, as of press time, the NTIA Web site had not been updated with the newly approved paragraph.

State, local and tribal radio system operators are also encouraged to explore how they will share in this new opportunity.

Sharing spectrum is an alternative to spectrum reallocation. Over past decades various actions have been taken to reallocate spectrum among federal and non-federal users. The process of migrating operations out of one frequency band and into another requires considerable time and resources.

Spectrum is critical to our nation's economy and security. Sharing empowers all users to efficiently and effectively execute their careful stewardship over this finite resource.

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